1. Flip, Flop And Fly (2:14)
(C.E. Calhoun/L.W. Turner)
Recorded 2/24/55
A-side of Columbia single 4-40471
With Les Elgart/Orchestra
Personnel: Larry Elgart, Charles Albertine, John Murtaugh, Richard Henry, Walter Betman (sax); Rubin Zarchy, Harold Wegbreit, Roy Ray, Ronald Woellmer (trumpet); Robert Dockstader, Al Robertson, Ray Sims, James Dahl (trombone); Vanig Housepian (guitar); Nobby Totah (bass); Ted Sommer (drums)
Arranged by Joe Reisman

2. Cry (3:04)
(C. Kohlman)
Recorded 10/16/51
A-side of OKeh single 6840
Personnel: Buddy Weed (piano); Mundell Lowe (guitar); Ed Shaughnessy (drums); Eddie Safranski (bass)

3. I Want To Be Loved† (2:24)
(S. Churchill)
Recorded 11/19/56
From the Columbia album "The Big Beat" (CL 961) (released 1/21/57)
With the Ray Ellis Orchestra
Personnel: Jimmy Nottingham, Bernie Glow, Joe Wilder (trumpet); Sam "The Man" Taylor, Abe "Boomie" Richman (tenor sax); Danny Bank (baritone sax); Gerald Serafino, Sam Marowitz (alto sax); J.J. Johnson, Bobby Byrne, Bob Alexander (trombone); Barry Galbraith (guitar); Nat Pierce (piano); Milt Hinton (bass); Osie Johnson (drums)
Arranged by Ray Ellis

4. She Didn't Say Nothin' At All* (2:13)
(J. Ray)
Recorded 5/28/51
From Ray's first session for OKeh, with Maurice King & His Wolverines
Later re-recorded and released on the EP "Johnnie Ray Spotlite" (B-1635)
Personnel: Maurice King, Louis Barnett, Thomas Bowles (sax); Russell Green (trumpet); Clarence Sherrill (bass); Neal Robinson (piano); Elbert Langford (drums)

5. Gee, But I'm Lonesome (2:43)
(B. Bryant/F. Bryant)
Recorded 2/19/52
A-side of Columbia single 4-39814
With The Four Lads
Orchestra under the direction of Jimmy Carroll
Personnel: Charles Magnante (accordion); Chauncey Morehouse, Harry Breuer (drums); Mundell Lowe (guitar); Frank Carroll (bass); Lou Stein (piano); Abe "Boomie" Richman (sax); Melvin Salmon (trumpet); Milt Lomaask, George Ockner (violin); Myor Rosen (harp)

6. How Long, How Long Blues (2:25)
(L. Carr)
Recorded 11/15/56
From the Columbia album "The Big Beat" (CL 961) (released 1/21/57)
With Ray Conniff & His Orchestra
Personnel: A. Hanlon, Hy White, Tony Mottola (guitar); Herman Grove Kapp (drums); Harry Breuer (xylophone); Buddy Weed (piano)

7. Ooh! Aah! Oh! (1:57)**
(L. Lee/J. Seelen)
Recorded 2/24/55
With Les Elgart/Orchestra
Personnel: Larry Elgart, Charles Albertine, John Murtaugh, Richard Henry, Walter Betman (sax); Rubin Zarchy, Harold Wegbreit, Roy Ray, Ronald Woellmer (trumpet); Robert Dockstader, Al Robertson, Ray Sims, James Dahl (trombone); Vanig Housepian (guitar); Nobby Totah (bass); Ted Sommer (drums)
Arranged by Joe Reisman

8. Lotus Blossom (3:44)
(A. Johnston/S. Coslow)
Recorded 11/21/56
From the Columbia album "The Big Beat" (CL 961) (released 1/21/57)
Personnel: Carl "Doc" Severinsen (trumpet); Eddie Bert, Samuel Leroy Taylor, Jr. (trombone); Barry Galbraith, Hy White (guitar); Herman Grove Kapp (drums); Don L. Arnone (guitar); Dick Hyman (piano); Milt Hinton, Albert Epstein (bass)

9. Mountains In The Moonlight (2:34)
(J. Ray)
Recorded 11/29/51
Originally released 1952
B-side of Columbia single 4-39698
With The Four Lads
Personnel: The Four Lads (background vocals); Lou Stein (piano); J. Crawford (drums); Frank Carroll (bass); Mundell Lowe (guitar); Myro Rosen (harp)

10. Soliloquy Of A Fool (2:08)
(F. Weismantel/R. Conniff)
Recorded 5/26/57
Originally released 1957
B-side of Columbia single 41069 (released 11/25/57)
With The Ray Conniff Orchestra
Personnel: Al Caiola, Danny Perri, Billy Mure, Tony Mottola (guitar); Frank Carroll (bass); David Francis, Herman Grove Kapp (drums); Andy Ackers (piano)
Arrangement by Ray Conniff

11. Sent For You Yesterday (2:23)
(J. Rushing/C. Basie/B. Durham)
Recorded 11/20/56
From the Columbia album "The Big Beat" (CL 961) (released 1/21/57)
With The Ray Conniff Orchestra
James Nottingham, Tony Fasso, Stan Fishelson, Clark Terry (trumpet); Jack Satterfield, Tommy Mitchell, James Louis Johnson, Chauncey Welsh (trombone); Gigi Gryce, Henry Freeman, Nicholas Charles Peters, Joseph A. Palmer, Albert Epstein (sax); Hy White, Al Casamenti, Edward Albert O'Connor (guitar); Ed Shaughnessy, Herman Grove Kapp (drums); Andrew Ackers (piano)
Arranged by Ray Conniff

12. I'll Make You Mine† (2:31)
(W. Scott)
Recorded 2/16/60
B-side of Columbia single 4-41626 (released 3/21/60)
With the Frank DeVol Orchestra, led by Teo Macero
Personnel: Don L. Arnone, John "Bucky" Pizzarelli, Al Casamenti (guitar); Andrew Ackers (piano); Sol Gubin (drums); George Ockner, Jack Zayde, Arnold Eidus, Harry Zarief, James A. Grasso, Leo Kruczek, Leo Kahn, Joseph Maligh aggi (strings)

13. Paths Of Paradise* (2:03)
(J. Ray)
Recorded 12/13/51
Personnel: The Four Lads (background vocals); Lou Stein (piano); J. Crawford (drums); Frank Carroll (bass); Mundell Lowe (guitar); Myro Rosen (harp)

14. Give Me Time (3:08)
(A. Wilder)
Recorded 10/15/51
Originally released 1952
B-side of Columbia single 4-39750
Personnel info unavailable

15. The Lonely Ones (2:38)**
(D. Ellington/D. George)
Recorded 9/26/58
With Duke Ellington & Orchestra
Personnel: Ray Nance, Clark Terry, William "Cat" Anderson, Harold "Shorty" Baker (trumpet); Quentin "Butter" Jackson, Britt Woodman, John Sanders (trombone); Russell Procope, Johnny Hodges, Harry Carney, Paul Gonsalves, Jimmy Hamilton, William B. Graham (sax); Duke Ellington (piano); Sam Woodyard (drums); Jimmy Wood (bass)

16. Such A Night (2:54)**
(L. Chase)
Recorded Spring 1954 (exact date unknown) at the London Palladium, England
From the Columbia South Africa album "Johnnie Ray At The Palladium"
Personnel info unavailable

17. Everyday I Have The Blues (2:53)
(W. York)
Recorded 11/20/56
From the Columbia album "The Big Beat" (CL 961) (released 1/21/57)
With The Ray Ellis Orchestra
Personnel: Jimmy Nottingham, Bernie Glow, Joe Wilder (trumpet); Sam "The Man" Taylor, Abe "Boomie" Richman (tenor sax); Danny Bank (baritone sax); Gerald Serafino, Sam Marowitz (alto sax); J.J. Johnson, Bobby Byrne, Bob Alexander (trombone); Barry Galbraith (guitar); Nat Pierce (piano); Milt Hinton (bass); Osie Johnson (drums)
Arranged by Ray Ellis

*Previously unissued
**Previously unissued in U.S.
†First time issued in stereo
All tracks are monaural except tracks 3, 12, and 15 which are in stereo.

HIGH DRAMA: THE REAL JOHNNIE RAY

In the spring of 1951, plummy-voiced, operatic dreamboat Mario Lanza was the most popular male singer in America...and aspiring pianist-singer Johnnie Ray was cooling his heels in a Motor City jail cell. Charged with accosting and soliciting an undercover cop in a burlesque house men's room, Ray, ironically, had cut his first record only a week earlier. Given the off-color circumstances, it seemed unlikely to make any impact.

A hearing-impaired, bisexual, hard-drinking, blues-yelping wraith who worked at Detroit's R&B mecca, the Flame Showbar, Ray pled guilty and paid the two-dollar fine. He continued wailing at the Flame, where he was the only white attraction, and—as blues shouter Jimmy Witherspoon recalled—"he did it nice, didn't clown or bullshit." Danny Kessler, the OKeh Records A&R man who discovered Ray, said "I was probably more overwhelmed with what I heard and saw than by anything else I had encountered artistically in my life."

Six months after the release of his first OKeh disk, pop wizard Mitch Miller heard intriguing word of (in his words) "the weird white kid who cries and kicks the piano." In October 1951 Miller brought him to New York and presented Johnnie with a song called "Cry." Six months later, no one even remembered who Mario Lanza had been.

Ray achieved this as a sight-unseen, unknown quantity: The majority of the public assumed "Cry" was performed by a black woman. (Indeed, one label exec's initial reaction on hearing Ray was "we don't think she's gonna make it.") By the time he debuted at Manhattan's prestigious Copacabana in April 1952, to a crowd that included Frank Sinatra, Ava Gardner, the Duchess of Windsor, Yul Brynner, Marlene Dietrich, and Tallulah Bankhead, "Cry" had sold over two million copies and Ray was the most sensational act known to Western Civilization.

Touted as the Prince of Wails, the Nabob of Sob, the Atomic Ray, the Guy With The Rubber Face And Squirt Gun Eyes, Johnnie Ray's intense style made him an international smash, topping pop charts from Johannesburg to Sydney to London. On stage, he positively roared: *Billboard* called the Copa debut "a masterful display of showmanship that evoked a mass hysteria resembling a Holy Roller meeting. It was hard to say who screamed more—Ray or the customers."

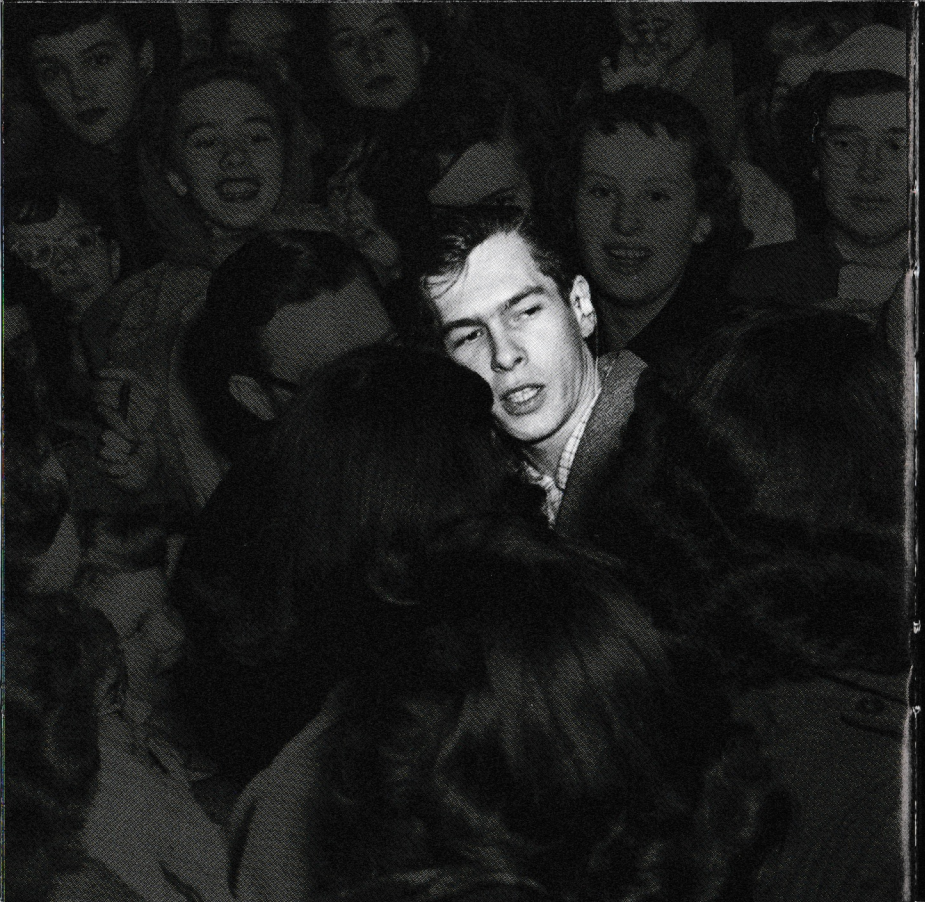
"Cry" launched one of the most out-of-control and artistically influential careers in pop music history. Blending belter Frankie Laine's minstrel macho with the sensitivity of balladeer Jimmy Scott, the rhythmic drive of Kay Starr and his own strange personal history—key to his entire aesthetic—Ray's jazz-tinged, pop-blues approach was unique unto itself. It was an all-or-nothing-at-all proposition. Country star Hank Williams admired Ray's sincerity and, in an interview with Ralph J. Gleason, even compared him to lachrymose King of Country, Roy Acuff. But Sinatra hated him. He spat out Ray's name like a curse and, in a conversation with columnist Earl Wilson, blamed Ray for the Voice's own pre-*From Here To Eternity* career slump.

Passion and incongruity had always been Johnnie Ray's calling cards. A soft-spoken farm boy born January 10, 1926 near Dallas, Oregon, he was raised on country music but spellbound by jazz as an adolescent. Locally Johnnie was a renowned wild child who ground out boogies by the hour at schoolmates' birthday parties and, on at least one occasion, dyed his flaxen locks a vibrant shade of green.

After a freak accident during a Boy Scout blanket toss—Johnnie was dumped and slammed his head into the dirt, where a twig penetrated and broke his eardrum—he immediately lost most of his hearing. The boy got up, wordlessly wandered alone into the woods, and tried to figure out what had happened. Never once mentioning the incident to his parents, Johnnie's condition went undiagnosed for well over a year.

As a result, Johnnie went through puberty in a murky, withdrawn state of near-total isolation. By the time he'd been fitted with a hearing aid, the Ray psyche had been ineluctably tempered by this season of confusion. His burgeoning bisexual nature contributed further to the bittersweet state of passion which became his artistic hallmark.

After an abortive year of pounding the pavement in Hollywood, playing "upholstered sewers" for a few bucks a night in 1949, Johnnie resolved to book his own way through nightclubs across the country, with the fantasy of a New York engagement as his personal Grail. But Detroit was fate's circumstantial sweet spot, providing



the artistic keynote. There, working alongside Jimmy Witherspoon, Billie Holiday and LaVern Baker, Ray claimed the power of R&B and began using it to his own peculiar end. His musical "blood, guts and thunder"—evidenced by the unadulterated wham of *High Drama*'s opener, "Flip, Flop And Fly"—was a mix of high-volume blues balling paradoxically fused with a sense of vulnerability and emotional extremes. It was a profound shock to the listening public.

"Johnnie did something that was completely different," Columbia label mate and buddy Tony Bennett explained. "Music in those days was still a kind of sweet long line of singers like Dick Haymes, Bob Eberly, and of course Frank Sinatra, who sang very sentimental, lovely, well-written songs, done very sweetly.

"But Johnnie became a visual performer. He was the first to charge an audience. He had to rip the curtain down, bang away on the piano, because he just couldn't stay cool enough *not* to…He smashed all the rules, standing up at the piano—no one ever did that, everybody sat at the piano—and it would become a great performance, a great visual performance. And I really consider Johnnie Ray to be, in that sense, the father of rock and roll."

Ray, who routinely leapt, wept, writhed and sank to his knees on stage, never made such a claim himself. Contemporary reviewers in *Billboard* and *Variety*, however, frequently did. As the first white pop singer to remove the microphone from its stand, the first to actually go down into the crowd, the first to break a single syllable up into a series of sharply phrased notes, Johnnie's presentation was revolutionary.

He was an almost undefinable force, and in 1952 gave the best description of the phenomena. "They come out to see what the freak is like," Johnnie said. "They want to know what this cat has got. I know what it is—I make them feel, I reach in and grab one of their controlled emotions, the deeply buried stuff, and yank it to the surface."

Nowhere is the Ray yank more explicit than on "Cry," which builds to a quivering crescendo of raw emotion so resonant that years later the song was still being covered by the diverse likes of Roy Orbison, Wayne Newton and Lynn Anderson; and on two remarkable Ray originals, "Mountains In The Moonlight" and "Paths Of Paradise," both of which are perfect models of his unconventional, almost pagan world view. His

pleading version of Alec Wilder's "Give Me Time" is another no less remarkable slice of interpretive prowess, while "Gee, But I'm Lonesome" demonstrates the acuity of his skill, transforming a maudlin lyric into a solid, soul-deep vehicle for transmitting psychic information.

It was, of course, the influence of black R&B and jazz singers that afforded Ray such prowess. And his forays into the blues are often remarkable, both in their natural ease and the way he utilizes traditional blues elements, as in the banshee falsetto which haunts "How Long, How Long Blues." Johnnie's song choices reflect a deep familiarity with the idiom (cf. his version of obscure blues chanteuse Savannah Churchill's "I Want to Be Loved").

Most illuminating is the sublimely forlorn "Lotus Blossom"—one of the rarest, most exotic prizes he carried away from the Flame Showbar. While the song had been recorded by Julia Lee & Her Boyfriends in 1947, it was, as Jimmy Witherspoon once explained, a 1930s-era reefer ballad: "'Lotus Blossom?' That's an old, *old* song—it was really called 'Sweet Marijuana.'" Re-titled by Lee to fit both its meter and obvious commercial release standards, Johnnie's performance ranks as one of the finest of his career.

High Drama also includes "The Lonely Ones," a track previously unreleased in the US and which Ray recorded with Duke Ellington and his orchestra; several tunes from the Basie songbook; and "Soliloquy Of A Fool," another stunning slice of the sloppy, microphone-mauling "blood, guts and thunder" which was Johnnie's specialty. When issued as a Columbia single, his version of The Drifters' "Such A Night" (heard here in a live-in-London rave-up) proved so inflammatory that it resulted in an FCC ban on both Ray's cover record *and* The Drifters original. While Ray's chart-topping days were over by 1956, Mitch Miller produced some extraordinarily walloping numbers in hopes of reinstating the singer: The cataclysmically brassy "Ooh! Ah! Oh!" and the roaring voodoo rock and roll novelty "I'll Make You Mine" are two of the greatest pop music misfires ever recorded.

By 1959, his offstage antics and numerous arrests (for disturbing the peace, public drunkenness, and on morals charges), combined with the lurid attacks of the scandal mags (*Confidential* tarred him with the implied queer brush in its premiere issue), had nearly wiped out Johnnie Ray's mainstream career. In the US, he worked steadily for the remainder of his life on the prestige-less nostalgia/bluehair/lounge circuit. But he remained a top draw in the UK and Australia, making annual visits to each country for almost 30 years, right up until his death from liver failure on February 24, 1990.

Part blues shouter, part beatnik, full-time party fiend and natural-born artist, Johnnie Ray was the missing link between Frank Sinatra and Elvis Presley. Alone, unaided, and without warning, he kicked down the door through which an army of rock and roll singers would saunter four years later. Endearing and disturbing, familiar yet unconventional, Johnnie Ray's guerrilla campaign against the gray flannel squares of the 1950s was a crucial jolt to popular culture. Though almost forgotten today, the entire course of American pop music would be completely different without him.

—Jonny Whiteside

Jonny Whiteside is the author of *Cry: The Johnnie Ray Story* (Barricade Books 1994) and *Ramblin' Rose: The Life And Career of Rose Maddox* (Vanderbilt University Press/Country Music Foundation Press, 1997). His writing has appeared in *Variety*, *The Journal Of Country Music* and *L.A. Weekly*.

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